

Transforming School and Society

Examining the Theoretical Foundations of Scholar-Practitioner Leadership

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to examine, using the tenets of cultural theory, critical theory, constructivist theory, and transformational theory as a lens, selected theoretical foundations of the scholar-practitioner. These foundations form the framework for understanding the nature of the scholar-practitioner construct and provide insight into the notion that transformational change cannot be effectively accomplished through the work of the scholar or the work of the practitioner in isolation. True change occurs when scholarship informs practice and practice influences scholarship through the work of the scholar-practitioner. The author argues that the scholar-practitioner leader focuses on transformational change in an effort to create a democratic school and society that exemplify values of social justice, diversity, equity, and works to promote equality.

... the most successful leader of all is one who sees another picture not yet actualized. He sees the things which belong in his picture but which are not yet there. . . . Above all, he should make his co-workers see that it is not his purpose which is to be achieved, but a common purpose, born of the desires and the activities of the group. (Mary Parker Follett, 1941, p. 272)

Introduction

Creating a vision of school leadership that involves democratic theory through transformational leadership is an ideal that educational leaders must strive to

make a reality. Creating this picture is the challenge that scholar–practitioners are committed and dedicated to in an effort to establish social justice and equality in school organizations and society. Accomplishment of this dream will be achieved through the establishment of a common purpose by all stakeholders, empowerment for authentic change, and challenging the injustices of the status quo (Quantz, Rogers, & Dantley, 1991).

To visualize how the scholar–practitioner model addresses the issues that face today’s educational system the author will analyze the composition of the scholar–practitioner model. This will be achieved through the investigation of two key points. The term scholar–practitioner itself must first be examined, then the focus will shift to the theoretical foundations that provide the roots for this model. To examine the theoretical framework of the scholar–practitioner, it is vital to deconstruct the term scholar (and by extension scholarship as the work of scholars) and the term practitioner. Scholarship refers to the knowledge and wisdom gained through the examination of educational theories and frameworks. Practice involves action in the performance of professional duties. The terms scholar and practitioner no longer serve as concepts in isolation when referring to the scholar–practitioner. The connection made between them with the incorporation of the extended hyphen (–) serves as a bridge that connects theory and practice ultimately leading to social change (Jenlink, 2001). The extended hyphen, in a postmodern positioning, reflects a deep, interdependent relationship between leadership theory and leadership practice ultimately providing an avenue for leadership praxis. Jenlink (2001) explains the connection between the scholar and the practitioner in stating:

The ideal of scholar–practitioner leadership envisions a “new scholarship” wherein the practitioner as a scholar of practice, seeks to mediate professional practice and formal knowledge theory through disciplined inquiry, and uses scholarly inquiry and practice to guide decisions on all levels of educational activity. (p. 7)

The purpose of this paper is to critically analyze the theoretical foundations of the scholar–practitioner leader heavily grounded in democratic leadership and supported by cultural theory, critical leadership theory, constructivist theory, and transformational leadership within a postmodern framework in an effort to create a “new scholarship” (Jenlink, 2001, p. 6).

Democratic Theory and the Scholar–practitioner

Democratic theory contributes a tremendous amount to the core beliefs of the scholar–practitioner. From the viewpoint of the scholar, democracy is seen as an abstract concept that was introduced by the Founders of the United States of America. It encompasses the notion that each individual has the right to have an equal voice in the decisions made by society (Anderson, 1996). In an educational

setting the scholar examines the foundations that shape methods of teaching. It is the duty of the scholar to explore in depth what principles are important to the community and to the education of future students.

For the practitioner, democracy is often viewed pragmatically as a process of voting, hierarchical leadership, and consensus by majority rule. This view of democracy is emblematic of how democracy is perceived to work (or attempt to work) in society. The educational practitioner must approach democracy from a multifaceted approach, being vigilant of common perceptions, assessing the value of those perceptions and ensuring implementation of those that are found to have merit. The educational practitioner applies the teaching practices that are viewed as important. The practitioner focuses on the actual implementation of a democratic system. The practitioner also focuses on the policy that benefits the greatest good for the greater number of individuals. Democracy is a vehicle for the practitioner to incorporate the ideas of the masses into functional works.

When the two dynamics of the word democracy are combined and viewed through the lens of the scholar-practitioner, a true transformation occurs. The scholar-practitioner model encourages leaders' to set goals in order to establish authentic, democratic, learning communities that are accepting to the notion that true change does not occur unless it is democratic change. Ultimately, for this to occur democratic leadership must begin with cultivation. Cultivation is focused on creating an environment that supports participation, sharing of ideas, and encourages the virtues of honesty, openness, and compassion (Starratt, 2001, p. 338). Establishing democratic learning communities through cultivation promotes commitment to a common goal ensuring that all voices are heard and respected. For democracy to be successful it must grow out of the collective interest of the group, and the means that are elected to achieve group ends (Maxcy, 1991, p. 51).

Educational leaders must facilitate this desire through the creation of an equitable environment that not only discusses the need to include all stakeholders, but ensures this desire through inclusionary action. The scholar-practitioner leader moves beyond the walls and boundaries of the school organization and reaches out to the larger community in a fight for equality and social justice. The commitment is no longer limited to the individual, but extends to the creation of a democratic society. For schools and communities to transform beyond traditional thoughts of democracy is to exemplify the true meaning of a democratic society in which stakeholders must critique current practices and believe change is possible (Quantz, Rogers, & Dantley, 1991, p. 105).

Scholar-practitioner leaders not only believe in the reality of change but take action to ensure that democratic ideas are upheld in school organizations and society. According to Arnstine (1995), "The ideals of a democratic society must become the first priority of its schools; the one set of considerations that cannot be sacrificed to any other school aims or intentions, no matter how serious they may seem at the time" (p. 42). Democratic leadership has the potential to lay the foundation of transformational change in school organizations but this

reality can only be accomplished when it becomes a priority for educational leaders. Although democratic leadership has the potential to be the vehicle of transformational change in school organizations true change will not occur until the issues of social injustice, inequality, and power relations are critically examined and addressed by all stakeholders.

Cultural Theory and the Scholar–practitioner

Cultural theory lends many ideas that are applicable to the scholar–practitioner. Cultural theory focuses on establishing the vital elements of social justice, equality and democracy (Anderson, 1996). The scholar focuses on the importance of social justice while the practitioner examines how to identify the existence of social justice. The work of the scholar–practitioner seeks to combine the efforts of the scholar and the practitioner in an effort to implement true change throughout the educational system and society as a whole. The scholar–practitioner openly acknowledges the existence of power domination by the power elite over the voices that remain silent due to social injustice (Anderson, 1996). Educational leaders acknowledge the notion that historically, schools tend to value the views of the dominant culture therefore ignoring the values of those without power and authority (Giroux, 1994). Accepting these injustices can lead to student failure, teacher turnover, and student conformity as well as teacher burnout. The scholar–practitioner moves beyond the acknowledgement of these inequalities and commits to take action to rectify these inequalities (Ryan, 1998). This is accomplished through reculturalization of the organization. An organization dedicated to reculturing examines current practices through a critical lens and seeks to establish new cultures that represent diversity, social justice, and democracy. Shields (2002) acknowledges the importance of cultural diversity in stating:

An understanding of multiculturalism as a form of cultural democracy in which all members have the right to belong and to participate fully may help to promote the development of *communities of difference* in schools—communities in which diversity is celebrated and valued. Ensuring that educators have the opportunity to listen to the stories of their colleagues and to learn from each other has the potential to bring increased awareness of prejudice and pain, and of acceptance and hope. It may promote reflections on, and dialogue about, practices either detrimental or advantageous to the welfare of students. (pp. 160–161, italics in original)

Scholar–practitioners are prepared and committed to address issues of injustice in order to create an environment where students gain knowledge of the skills that are necessary to achieve personal freedom and celebrate a society that embraces social justice. This form of cultural democracy not only seeks to change existing inequalities but to incorporate strategies to eliminate these inequalities

throughout the educational system through modeling and role playing in classroom settings. Through the creation of a democratic school organization students learn not only the value of democracy and diversity but how to implement these values into their daily lives through the process of transformation (Starratt, 2001). This interaction with society will allow students the opportunity to transfer and implement what they have observed and learned in school into their daily lives and be active change agents in the world in which they live.

Critical Leadership Theory and the Scholar–practitioner

Tenets of critical leadership theory apply equally to the scholar and the practitioner. Critical leadership theory is a dedication and commitment to social change through reflection and analysis. For the scholar, criticality is manifested by means of reflection through the use of a critical lens. Critical reflection involves a thorough examination of current beliefs, theories, and practices. For the practitioner, criticality is taking action to improve current practices through the process of self reflection (Jenlink, 2001). Although critical reflection and taking action to promote change are important, independently they alone cannot promote long term change therefore establishing the need to provide leadership through the lens of the scholar–practitioner.

The scholar–practitioner combines both a critical lens and action with a focus on improvement in schools and improvement of the life situations of disadvantaged groups. Critical approaches focus less with matters of efficiency and positional authority and seek to find ways to improve the life situations of disadvantaged groups. This is accomplished through elevating the importance of social critique and advocating for the advancement of democracy, equity, and social justice (Ryan, 1998, p. 257). This critical lens guides both inquiry and practice to ensure that social justice, equity, and caring are a generative process associated with knowledge. The scholar–practitioner leader learns from practice through the use of the critical lens and regards it as an integral part for decisions about practice (Jenlink, 2001, p. 11).

Operating from the viewpoint of a scholar–practitioner it is vital to understand the dynamics that define the relationship between what is known and how it is implemented through the process of deconstruction. To accomplish this, scholar–practitioners must have a deep awareness of knowledge-*for*-practice. This knowledge is represented by formal research and is focused on generating a standard knowledge base for the practitioner. Knowledge-*in*-practice is represented in the form of critical reflection as related to self-awareness and the social practice of others. Finally, knowledge-*of*-practice involves the examination of local theory through the assessment of learning communities and the scholar–practitioner’s day-to-day activities (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999).

Through the application of ideas based in critical theory we discover that acceptance of the status quo has led to the injustices that exist in our schools and

society today. Managers traditionally accept the values of the dominant group and allow control to be dictated by those with the perceived power (Anderson, 1996). Scholar–practitioner leaders, using a critical lens, challenge the acceptance of the status quo by acknowledging the unequal distribution of power, and seek to eliminate these oppressive conditions. This refusal to accept the status quo incorporates democratic ideals and seeks to transcend through past practices and establish new practices that emulate social justice and equality.

Constructivist Theory and the Scholar–Practitioner

Constructivist theory focuses on the construction of new knowledge through observation, experiences and new understandings. These experiences and new knowledge must be deconstructed as a necessary component of the constructivist sociology and psychology of learning. This enables the development of a qualified theory of democratic leadership for school administrators (Starratt, 2001, p. 334). This theory of leadership moves beyond the traditional and mechanist systems perspective to a mindset that questions critical issues and constructs a plan to build a better future. Scholars seek information on the foundations of constructivist theory and its relation to traditional points of view.

Practitioners apply constructivist principles in their daily work and practice. It is essential to have knowledge, but knowledge alone is not a sufficient catalyst for change. Knowledge gained through research and observation frequently leads to the construction of new knowledge. Incorporating this new insight into daily professional practice connects the observation of the scholar with the implementation of the practitioner. This connection between the scholar and the practitioner is symbolized by the use of the extended hyphen (Jenlink, 2001). Practice must be critically informed of newly constructed knowledge in order to provide an atmosphere in which authentic change is plausible. Scholar–practitioners continually explore the world around them seeking to construct new knowledge, reflect on current professional practices and use knowledge to influence decisions that promote social justice.

The traditional view of educational administration involves a top down model with school staff members accepting the idea of what a school should resemble from an administrators point of view, and implementing the ideals and agenda of the school administrator rather than the ideals of the group. The constructivist theory of leadership seeks to empower all stakeholders to encourage collaboration within the group to solve problems, inform decisions, and build relationships all in the pursuit of a common purpose to improve education (Quantz, Rogers, & Dantley, 1991). Incorporating constructivist values the scholar–practitioner understands the importance of empowering leadership at all levels. Scholar–practitioners understand the value of using critical reflection and the process of deconstruction to construct new knowledge.

Transformational Leadership and the Scholar–practitioner

Historically, educational administrators have managed school organizations through exchanges or transactions between leaders and followers. Transformational leaders move beyond transactional relationships in an effort to transform others through raising their level of human awareness. By raising the level of awareness of the organizational members, the distribution of power between leaders and followers is diminished and followers are empowered to become contributing members that influence change (Foster, 1994, p. 45). Leadership is distributed in an effort to transform and respond to organizational needs. Therefore, this distribution of leadership establishes an organization that promotes social justice and democracy from every corner of the organization. Bennis and Nannus (1997) refer to a transformational leader as one who commits people to action, who converts followers into leaders, and who may convert leaders into agents of change (p. 3). Rather than focusing on control and direct coordination the transformational leader seeks to build the organization's capacity to innovate through the selection of purpose and the ability to support the development of changes to practices of teaching and learning (Hallinger, 2003, p. 330).

As an agent of change the scholar–practitioner not only refuses to accept the status quo but also challenges it to ensure an authentic commitment to democracy. The scholar–practitioner embraces both theory and practice, yet understands “there is no difference between theory and practice; there are only different realms in which people engage in practice and theory” (Foster, 1994, p. 48). Challenging the status quo involves commitment from the individual and larger community to give precedence to the deconstruction of existing social and cultural issues and create a new culture through a common vision, goal, and purpose in an effort to provide meaning and commitment to democracy. Scholar–practitioner leaders understand that changing the status quo cannot be accomplished until the community accepts responsibility, engages in critique, and believes that change is possible (Quantz, Rogers, & Dantley, 1991, p. 106).

For true transformation to occur the scholar–practitioner leader must combine the principles of democracy and cultural leadership through the use of a critical lens with the goal of constructing new knowledge to affect change. Transformation is an ongoing process that is often met by resistance but facing this resistance is the only way to promote a democratic society. In turn a democratic society promotes social mobility while improving the school organization.

Conclusion

Various aspects of democratic leadership have been explored through the lens of the scholar–practitioner construct using the guiding principles and core beliefs of cultural theory, critical theory, constructivist theory, and finally, transformational

theory. The ultimate goal of the scholar–practitioner is to create school organizations that challenge the status quo and promote an environment that fosters diversity, democracy, equity, equality, and social justice in the hopes of transforming society. This transformation is possible through the beliefs held by the scholar–practitioner. Through the exploration of the scholar–practitioner framework it is evident that knowledge must inform practice and practice must inform knowledge and neither concept of knowledge or practice can produce effective change in isolation. True and authentic change is accomplished through the work of the bridge that connects the scholar to the practitioner and the practitioner to the scholar.

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